

Art, Politics and the 'Culture Industry': Glasgow 1990

Visitors to the European City of Culture during recent weeks will have found more going on than either themselves or the city fathers could have anticipated. They have landed in the midst of a pitched battle, otherwise known as 'the Elspeth King affair'. It is a complex web of humbug, deceit and cover-up; And a steady trickle of information on the subject has now been finding its way into the national media, the issue has even been reported in France. For some observers it remains a storm in a teacup. They cannot understand why such an apparently trivial issue should cause such repercussions.

The campaign in support of Ms King has cast doubt not only on the 'Culture City' enterprise itself but on aspects of contemporary town-planning, which in turn serve to highlight the shift in philosophy of government over the past decade, both locally and nationally. Of particular concern is the ^{apparent} continued erosion of democracy and the manner in which a labour-controlled council like Glasgow District ^{will} ~~seems to relish the opportunity of implementing~~ ^{radical} even the more extreme aspects of Tory Party policy.

The explosion was ignited by the creation of the new post of Keeper of Social History in the city's Museums and Art Galleries department, ^{regarded by some as a possible as} ~~now seen as little more than a ruse to finally wrest control from Elspeth King, Curator of the People's Palace. No~~ ^{the person in charge} ~~matter the title of the job she had been in charge for the past 16~~ ^{has} ~~years.~~ Assisted by her deputy, Michael Donnelly, she transformed a semi derelict building into one of the ^{finer} ~~foremost~~ social history museums in Europe. * Her reputation is unimpeachable; she is generally reckoned one of the top curators of social history in the English-speaking world. But what's in a name? Within the bureaucracy of the museums and art galleries services the post of Keeper is graded superior to that of Curator. In effect the powers-that-be created a boss to put her in her place, and that place is preferably on the street. She is being victimised in a shameful fashion.

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Ms King overcame the humiliation of queuing for an interview for her own job. When she did apply she failed to get it. Labour MEP Janey Buchan is on record as having heard ¹⁴ months ^{ago} before the actual interview that this was to be the case. Other insiders were aware of the reality around a year before. But the charade was played to the bitter end. Control of the People's Palace and all of its considerable social and historical artefacts now passes from Ms King to the newly created Keeper. And with a quite ruthless disregard of their own public assurances to the contrary the new regime has moved in with a vengeance: paintings and rare books from the museum's collection have already been earmarked for removal. One of Ms King's most recent instructions ^{was} is that under no circumstances must she receive or dispatch a letter without having it read ~~and initiated~~ by a superior.

There are those who may yet wonder what all the fuss is about. Perhaps they are entitled to wonder. Within the public sector these days tales of injustice are commonplace. One of the first tactical exercises in the new approach is to railroad out those ^{traditional} employees who continue to harbour 'old fashioned principles' - examples are rife in the health, education and social services. But the most obvious parallel is with the shabby circumstances surrounding the move from London to Manchester of the National Museum of Labour History. A common factor is the prominent part played by Julian Spalding, current Director of Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries. Former Director of Manchester Art Galleries he was centrally engaged in negotiating the NMLH move north. It was Mr Spalding who chaired the committee who rejected Ms King's application for the post of Keeper and instead appointed Mark O'Neil. Along the way he made the by now notorious comment that there were 'no jobs for the girls'.

Labour MP Gwyneth Dunwoody has referred to what is ^{now} happening in Glasgow as 'almost a mirror' of what occurred in Manchester when Terry McCarthy was finally sacked after being in control of the NMLH for some 13 years: 'Mr Spalding's system of management is such that he unfortunately seems to think he is challenged by anyone with a deep knowledge of a museum under his control.' McCarthy

it's great collection is to be 'nationalised'.

himself refers to "this new breed of gallery director/business manager (who) see people like Elspeth and myself as anathema. They can't deny our academic qualifications and therefore go on about us not having the right business acumen. (We) share what I would call virtues and what (they) see as vices.' Mr McCarthy will be coming to address a public meeting in Glasgow on the 23rd of August.

Ironies and complexities abound. Julian Spalding's successful application for the Directorate at Glasgow was at the expense of Elspeth King, for she had also applied for that job. Such is her reputation that she was the only employee of the museum services to be shortlisted and interviewed for it. It now seems certain Mr Spalding was 'destined' for the post.

Needless to say a great many people both in and outside Glasgow are appalled by what has happened. This is why a support campaign was formed. It has occasioned the biggest post-bag to the Glasgow Herald since Billy Graham's barnstorming evangelical tour back in the 1950's. The District Labour Party itself has 'deplored the decision not to appoint Ms King'. The issue has been raised in the House of Commons by Norman Buchan. A petition was signed by some 10,000 people, including many labour councillors. But those in authority fail to be moved. Rather the opposite, they have attacked the supporters of the campaign. And slowly but surely, by implication or association, other matters have dredged their way to the surface.

In this year of 1990 the strategy adopted by Mr Patrick Lally's Labour-controlled Glasgow District Council closely resembles that of the national government. There is a consistency and coherence in Mr Lally's approach that is unmistakeable. He is rather less circumspect than Mrs Thatcher but conducts and justifies himself in a similar manner.

One significant factor in the present controversy is the inability of officialdom to countenance criticism. Under attack elsewhere in Britain people should not be surprised to find free speech and expression a 'problem' here also. Elspeth King is denied the right to defend herself publicly. She is not allowed to speak to the media. She is not at liberty to express her fears of

the damaging affect the new regime will have on the People's Palace under a policy diametrically opposed not only to her own but to the fundamental principles of the Labour Party itself.

Mr Lally has also barred his own Labour councillors from commenting on the affair. Yet officials who fall into line behind himself are empowered to talk to anyone they like. This extraordinary double standard continues to allow statements to be issued by Mr Spalding and Mr O'Neil (new Keeper of Social History). It has also empowered senior administrators of the 'Culture City' enterprise to enter into the attack; they see the present controversy as a threat to their own '1990' endeavours.

One letter in support of Elspeth King published by the Glasgow Herald bore the names of some 63 people, including such well known critics and artists as Alasdair Gray, Edwin Morgan, Philip Hobsbaum, Liz Lochhead, Peter McDougall, Alan Spence, Agnes Owens, Tom Leonard, Archie Hind, Pat Kane, Freddie Anderson, Billy Connolly, Bernard MacLaverty. Mr Lally's response arrived in a 2000 word statement to the press. He dismissed the group (and the support campaign in general) as 'these dilettanti', 'well-heeled authors and critics', 'professional whingers'. Within the same document he very ably summed up his own approach to art and culture: It is the intention of the City Council and our colleagues on Strathclyde Region...to use the title (Cultural Capital of Europe) to the maximum advantage - we are going to milk it for all it is worth...'

Elsewhere writers and critics have been referred to as 'an embarrassment to this city and all of its cultural workforce', in which context 'cultural workforce' refers to arts administrators. Some epithets include 'writers who find themselves writing the books their fathers should have written'; 'those who choose deliberately to exclude themselves' (from the 'cultural celebrations'); 'pathetic, factless, plank-walking, anti-1990-ism'; the 'pro-poverty lobby'. Certain terms being employed are more familiar: 'crypto-communists', 'self proclaimed anarchists'; 'trotskyists', 'aggrieved pseudo-intellectuals', 'racists' (Mark O'Neil, the person now in charge of Ms King, is Irish while Julian

Spalding, the man in charge of both, is English).

The part of the controversy touching on questions of art has shown those at the helm of the 1990 programme to be rather inept, to put it mildly, with 'culture' more often than not being a synonym for 'etiquette'. Some old fashioned red herrings have landed on the beach, of the 'high art' versus 'working class art' and 'tradition' as opposed to 'the modern' variety. On the one hand critics are dismissed as elitist while on the other they are called philistine. Officials are also playing the patriot game; Glaswegians who criticise the Year of Culture or its leading exhibition, the critical and financial disaster, Glasgow's Glasgow, are criticising the city itself.

Ultimately this must raise the question of why Glasgow District Council continues to put itself into such an acutely embarrassing and potentially vulnerable position? What does the current Labour administration have to gain? Or lose?

There has been a battery of reports in recent week. These include the revelations concerning the actual costs of European Culture Capital year. As much as 10% of the general services' budget has been 'milked' from every council department in Glasgow except housing to pay for the 'Cultural Celebration'. Admission charges have been introduced for the MacLellan Galleries and the Glasgow's Glasgow exhibition, in direct opposition to the principle of free access for the people to their own artistic and cultural heritage. Glasgow's Glasgow itself, now being described as 'the flop of the year', is set to make a loss of some £3.5 millions. The charitable company formed to operate the exhibition has had a £3 million loan from the District Council transformed into a 'grant' ~~without so much as a by your leave from Glaswegian Poll Tax Payers.~~ Four directors of this company are officials of the District Council itself, including ~~the ubiquitous~~ Mr Spalding.

There is now news of further demolition in the Gorbals; structural change at the City Halls; more private development along the banks of the Clyde; the sale of the old school in Charlotte Street to one ~~polity~~ bid of £68,000 - set for the private education of the sons and daughters of modern Merchant City. There is the

£600,000 sale of a prime site in the centre of the city, now being rushed through in spite of other professional estimates that set its value around the £5 million mark, and further in spite of serious doubts being expressed over the veracity of the planned project itself. The Labour administration is said to be 'anxious, in the current financial year, to sell off assets and realise capital receipts'.

Perhaps the most illuminating report of all concerns news of private development on Glasgow Green itself, where the People's Palace is situated. This ancient common land lies at the very heart of the city and has been sacred to generations of Glaswegians for some 1000 years. Like the People's Palace prior to the advent of Elspeth King and assistant Michael Donnelly the 'Green' has suffered quite outrageous neglect for many many years. In contemporary parlance this too is a 'prime site'. Mr Lally's Glasgow District Council have it on the planning agenda.

The city is being run as though it were a public company having to operate in an expanding free market economy. Using vehicles such as 'European Capital of Culture Year' it is being made attractive to potential shareholders, *as if in preparation for an* ~~in line with its~~ inevitable privatisation. The good assets are exhibited while the bad assets are kept out of sight. Some assets have already been sold and others are being polished in anticipation, or else tarnished, also in anticipation. T

If there is one unifying theme through all of this it is simply that there is no mandate for any of it. X Not only are the people of Glasgow being deprived of their right to discuss the matter, in many cases the same applies to their elected representatives. Those who remain outside the circle are being brushed aside. The Labour administration is declaring that management must be left to manage; politicians are not to interfere in matters of 'business'. ~~So-called~~ *in the wake* 'Experts' such as Julian Spalding, like Sir Robert Scholey or Sir Ian MacGregor before him, are to be empowered 'to get on with their job'. Within the logic of this philosophy of government, local or national, there is no longer room for dialogue, the very essence of democracy. This is

why the campaign in support of Elspeth King has taken such root.
It is also why another campaign has now been launched, this time in
support of Glasgow Green.

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